



# Frequently Asked Questions about Noise Pollution -- for Citizens

from Ecology's Rules Unit; prepared in conjunction with the Office of Regulatory Assistance

Noise is part of our everyday lives and affects some people more severely than others. This publication provides answers to the most frequently asked questions the Department of Ecology (Ecology) receives about noise pollution. The information is divided into three sections: general noise pollution information, how to file a noise complaint, what to do if a noise complaint has been filed against you.

## General noise-pollution information:

### **Q: Does Ecology have rules for noise pollution?**

**A:** Yes, Ecology's rules are:

- Chapter 173-58 WAC, Sound Level Measurement Procedures
- Chapter 173-60 WAC, Maximum Environmental Noise Levels
- Chapter 173-62 WAC, Motor Vehicle Noise Performance Standards

In addition, the state law can be found in Chapter 70.107 RCW, Noise Control Act.

### **Q: What is the role of local government in regulating noise?**

**A:** There are three roles that local government may have in regulating noise:

1. Adopt a local noise ordinance to set noise standards for their area.
2. Enforce those local noise ordinances.
3. If no local noise ordinances exist, enforce Ecology's rules.

### **Q: Does Ecology approve local government noise ordinances?**

**A:** Any local noise ordinance that is different from Ecology's rules must be submitted to Ecology. If Ecology doesn't approve/disapprove the local noise ordinance within 90 days, the ordinance is considered approved.

### **Q: What if the local noise ordinance is different from the Department of Ecology rule?**

**A:** Local noise ordinances can differ from Ecology's rules when necessary due to local conditions. Local governments are encouraged to develop their own noise ordinances (a county or city law) and dedicate funding and personnel to enforce those standards. When the local noise ordinance is different, the standards and limits in the local noise ordinance will apply. If something is not covered by the local noise ordinance, then Ecology's rules apply.



**Q: What if there is no local noise ordinance in my area?**

**A:** If your local government has not adopted a noise ordinance then Ecology's noise rules apply and are enforceable by the local government.

**Q: How is noise measured?**

**A:** Noise or sound is measured in decibels (dB or dBA). The "A" filter (dBA) is the one most frequently used because it best matches the range of human hearing. An instrument called a sound-level meter is used to measure the decibel level. It is designed to respond in approximately the same way as the human ear and gives an objective assessment of sound-pressure level.

**Q: How loud is too loud?**

**A:** If you are in a residential area, the maximum allowed amount of noise coming into the property is 55dBA from another residential area, 57dBA from a commercial area, and 60dBA from an industrial area.

If you are in a commercial area, the maximum allowed amount of noise coming into the property is 57dBA from a residential area, 60dBA from another commercial area, and 65dBA from an industrial area.

If you are in an industrial area, the maximum allowed amount of noise coming into the property is 60dBA from a residential area, 65dBA from a commercial area, and 70dBA from another industrial area.

Noise Source	Receiving Property		
	Residential	Commercial	Industrial
Residential	55 dBA	57 dBA	60 dBA
Commercial	57	60	65
Industrial	60	65	70

Your local noise ordinance may have different maximum dBA levels. When the local noise ordinance is different, those are the standards and limits that apply.

**Q: What are the decibel levels for everyday noises?**

Airport plane take-off	120dB
Rock concert	105dB
Lawn Mower	100dB
Blender	90dB
Garbage Disposal	80dB
Traffic noise	70-80dB
Vacuum	70dB
Office	60-65dB
Library	35dB
Breathing	10dB

**Q: Is off-road and other non-highway vehicle noise regulated?**

**A:** Yes. State law requires off-road and other non-highway vehicles use specified noise-muffling devices (RCW 46.09.120(1)(e) maximum limits and test procedures). State agencies and local governments may adopt regulations governing the operation of non-highway vehicles on property, streets, or highways within their jurisdiction, provided they are not less stringent than state law (RCW 46.09.180 regulation by local political subdivisions).

**Q: Who should I contact about railroad noise?**

**A:** The Federal Railroad Administration handles complaints about rail noise.

Federal Railroad Administration  
Regional Administrator; Region 8  
Murdock Building  
703 Broadway  
Vancouver, WA 98660  
(360) 696-7536

**Filing a noise complaint:**

**Q: What should I do about a noise problem?**

**A:** The first thing you should do is contact the person making the noise and try to work out a solution. Your neighbor may not be aware the noise is disturbing you. Talk to him/her. Be polite but explain that the noise is disturbing you and why. It will help to provide your neighbor with the details (noise level, duration, time of day, etc.) instead of just complaining. If you can give suggestions for how to minimize the noise (lower volume, less time doing the activity causing the noise, stop earlier in the day, etc.), it will also help.

**Q: How do I make a noise complaint?**

**A:** To file a formal complaint, you need to contact your local government to find out which department has the responsibility to enforce the noise ordinance or rules and the proper procedures for filing a complaint. If you live *inside* city limits, inquire with your city police department or city hall. If you live *outside* the city limits, inquire with the County Sheriff's Department or county commissioners' office.

*Note: The Department of Ecology does not have authority to enforce noise rules or local noise ordinances.*

**Q: Why do I need to go to my local government and not Ecology?**

**A:** Ecology does not have the authority to enforce noise rules or local noise ordinances. Your local government has the authority to enforce noise rules and local noise ordinances.

**Q: What happens to my complaint?**

**A:** Formal complaints are handled in a variety of ways, depending on the city or county. Responses in your area could include:

1. Informal visit to the location where the noise is coming from.
2. Official noise measurement
3. Issuing a citation. This could be a fine, a warning or a notice to comply.
4. No response.

**Q: What if a local government chooses not to enforce noise rules or ordinances?**

**A:** The authority to enforce noise standards is delegated by the state to local governments. There is nothing in the current RCW or WAC that makes it mandatory to enforce local noise ordinances.

**Q: What can I do if the local government doesn't follow up on my complaint?**

**A:** There are a few options you can pursue.

1. Check with your homeowners or neighborhood association. There may be community rules that deal with noise or a formal process to help resolve issues with neighbors.
2. Arrange for mediation (through district court, non-profit org., etc.).
3. Consult with an attorney.

**Q: How do I get noise measured?**

**A:** You have a few options:

1. You can contact the local department that deals with noise issues and have them come out and measure the noise.
2. Hire a private company to measure noise levels and prepare a report of their results.
3. You can get the equipment to measure noise levels. For your results to be valid the measurement must be done by a person properly trained in measuring noise and the use of sound-measuring equipment.

**Noise complaint filed against you:**

**Q: What if someone files a noise complaint against me?**

**A:** The first thing you should do, if possible, is contact the person making the noise complaint and try to work out a solution. The next step would be to get a copy of either the local noise ordinances or Ecology's rules and determine if and/or how you are violating noise standards. If you are in violation, you need to take the steps necessary to fix the problem.

**Q: How do I check the noise levels reported in the complaint?**

**A:** You have a few options:

1. You can ask the local department that deals with noise issues to come out and measure the noise.
2. Hire a private company to measure noise levels and prepare a report of its results.
3. You can get the equipment to measure noise levels. For your results to be valid, the measurement must be done by a person properly trained in measuring noise and the use of sound-measuring equipment.

**More information**

For more information about noise pollution, visit Ecology's Noise Web site at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/laws-rules/noise.htm>.